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ABSTRACT

A brief questionnaire was sent to a random selection of 70 librarians in the State University of New York Librarians' Association Directory to determine the frequency of their use of humor at the reference desk and in the library instruction classroom, their perceptions of classroom humor, and their reasons for using humor in these situations. There were 43 respondents. The study also examines the use of humor as a strategy for putting students at ease, getting their attention, and creating a classroom environment and reference desk interaction more conducive for learning, as distinguished from its use as a pedagogical strategy. Analyses of the responses indicate that: (1) reference and instruction librarians have a great deal of respect for the students with whom they work in classrooms and at the reference desk; (2) they are also respectful of the possibilities and power of the use of appropriate humor; (3) they are concerned about the inappropriate use of humor; (4) they feel that use of appropriate humor makes them more approachable by students; and (5) they consider that the most important reasons for using humor are to put people at ease and facilitate relaxation, with establishing rapport the next most important. This report contains the letter explaining the study and asking the recipient to participate in the study; a copy of the questionnaire; a statistical analysis of the responses received; additional comments from the respondents; and a brief discussion of the findings. (BBM)

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LIBRARIAN HUMOR IN CLASSROOM AND REFERENCE

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Presented at the
State University of New York Librarians' Association
Annual Conference
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June 1992
SUNY Oneonta

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Penfield Library
SUNY Oswego
Oswego NY 13126
13 December 1991

Dear

For a paper which I am submitting to the ENY/Ontario ACRL, Eastern New York/Ontario American College and Research Libraries 1992 program planning committee, I would like to ask your assistance in completing a brief questionnaire about the use of librarian humor. Among other things, I am proposing in this paper that employing humor at the Information Desk and in the library instruction classroom results in positive outcomes for both librarians and students; that librarians with a sense of humor are perceived as more approachable by students; and that a positive rapport may be enhanced by suitable humor on the part of the librarian.

This brief questionnaire assesses frequency of humor in classroom and at reference, your perceptions of classroom humor, and reasons for using humor in classroom and at reference. I will be examining the use of humor as a strategy for putting students at ease, getting their attention, and creating a classroom environment and reference desk interaction more conducive for learning, as distinguished from its use as a pedagogical strategy.

Please return the questionnaire to me by 15 January at the latest; my finished paper is due to the program committee on 1 February. And I thank you *very* much for your assistance on what promises to be an interesting and (is it ok to say?) fun study.

Sincerely,

Nancy Seale Osborne
Associate Librarian/Archivist
(315)341-3567
enclosure: questionnaire

LIBRARIAN HUMOR
IN CLASSROOM AND AT REFERENCE:
A QUESTIONNAIRE

1) I employ humor in the library instruction classroom (please circle one):
   a) only occasionally, not on a daily basis
   b) 1-2 times per class session
   c) 3-4 times per class session
   d) more than 4 times per class session

2) I employ humor in the library instruction classroom (please circle as many as appropriate):
   a) through personal anecdote or story related to subject/topic
   b) through general anecdote or story related to subject/topic
   c) by making a brief humorous comment directed at the topic, subject, or class procedures
   d) by making a brief humorous comment directed at the class as a whole
   e) by making a brief humorous (self-deprecating) comment directed at yourself
   f) by making a brief humorous comment directed at the college
   g) by making a brief humorous comment directed at national or world events, personalities, or at popular culture

3) I employ humor in reference desk interaction with students (please circle as many as appropriate):
   a) by making a brief humorous comment regarding students' difficulty in finding material
   b) by making a brief humorous comment related to subject/topic
   c) by making a brief humorous comment via personal anecdote related to subject/topic
   d) in interaction with colleagues in a joint answering of a reference question

4) Please rank these reasons for using humor at reference or in the classroom (numbers 1 to 11):
   ___Puts students at ease, relaxes them or loosens them up
   ___Gets their attention
   ___Shows that I am (as Lily Tomlin would say) a "real person"
   ___Helps to keep class or desk interaction less formal
   ___Makes learning more fun
   ___Serves as a tension-releaser

(over, please)

___Maintains student interest
___Helps illustrate a point
___Establishes rapport with students
___Helps students remember a point
___Provides a change of pace

5) Additional comments (which are welcome!):_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

PLEASE RETURN THIS QUESTIONNAIRE BY JANUARY 15, 1992, TO:

Nancy Seale Osborne
Penfield Library
Associate Librarian/Archivist
SUNY College at Oswego
Oswego NY 13126 (315) 341-3567

****a stamped, self-addressed envelope is enclosed****

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE
WITH THIS STUDY!

LIBRARIAN HUMOR
IN CLASSROOM AND AT REFERENCE

RESULTS:

1) 44% employ humor in classroom 1-2 times per session
   30% employ humor in classroom more than 4 times per session
   15% employ humor in classroom only occasionally
   11% employ humor in classroom 3-4 times per session

2) 74% employ humor in classroom by making brief humorous comment related to subject/topic
   71% employ humor in classroom through personal anecdote or story related to subject/topic
   65% employ humor in classroom through general anecdote or story related to subject/topic
   58% employ humor in classroom by making brief humorous comment directed at national or world events, personalities, or at popular culture
   37% employ humor in classroom by making a brief humorous (self-deprecating) comment directed at self
   27% employ humor in classroom by making brief comment directed at class as a whole
   7% employ humor in classroom by making brief humorous comment directed at the college

3) 63% employ humor in reference desk interaction by making brief humorous comment related to subject/topic
   62% employ humor in reference desk interaction with colleagues in a joint answering of a reference question
   55% employ humor in reference desk interaction by making brief humorous comment via personal anecdote related to subject/topic
   39% employ humor in reference desk interaction by making brief humorous comment regarding students' difficulty in finding material

NSO/1992

Ranked Reasons for Using Humor
N = 38

REASONS \ RANKING	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Put at ease	16	7	4	2	2	3	2	2	0	0	0
Get attention	2	4	4	4	6	6	5	0	2	2	3
Show I'm real	0	4	3	1	0	2	3	2	4	6	10
Reduce formality	3	5	2	4	5	3	1	4	5	2	2
Make learning fun	3	2	2	4	5	2	1	7	2	2	5
Release tension	3	3	2	5	4	3	3	3	4	5	4
Maintain interest	2	2	5	4	3	3	2	7	3	0	0
Illustrate point	1	4	2	2	2	4	1	4	5	8	3
Establish rapport	8	4	9	2	4	3	4	1	1	1	0
Emphasize point	0	2	2	3	2	3	8	2	5	6	6
Change pace	0	1	3	5	4	5	2	5	6	5	3

Putting people at ease, facilitating relaxation, and loosening up are head and shoulders above other reasons for use of humor in classroom and at the reference desk. Closely related, establishing a rapport was ranked as the next most important reason for employing humor. Other reasons were widely distributed as choices by the respondents.

NSO/92

LIBRARIAN HUMOR
IN CLASSROOM AND AT REFERENCE

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

working hard to make people feel welcome:
"I use humor during all my interactions with others--whether on the job, at home, etc. Since libraries are often intimidating to people, I work hard to make people feel welcome and at ease. Humor is one of the main ways I do this."

quotes:
"Life without humor is like a forest without birds."

"Humor is a sign of intelligence!"

ideas for humor?
"I am trying to increase my use of humor. Any ideas?"

approachable and fun-loving:
"I am careful not to immediately resort to humor so as to not appear flippant or unconcerned. I try to convey at first that I take my responsibility as a librarian/teacher seriously, but I like to be approachable and fun-loving, too."

blank stares:
"There are times when my attempt at humor is met with blank stares. Too often students resent being in a library instruction class and resist taking part even by smiling or laughing at a humorous attempt."

"I guess my sense of humor isn't as in touch with eighteen year olds as (it is) with those over thirty."

"Any attempts at being *au courant* with (members of) the youth culture falls flat, because I am hopelessly out of touch. I don't even get MTV!"

essential ingredient:
"I would say humor is an essential, if sometimes small, part of effective reference and bibliographic instruction."

curriculum development:
"I make overheads involving cartoons, humorous new articles, even to the point of adding my own words."

"I use as examples, amusing/humorous statistics, slogans, etc. related to subject."

"I have an interesting list of movies with librarians in them and use parts of that in my presentation."

conscious humor:
"I don't consciously think about using humor--that's just the way I am."

"So much depends upon the style and ease of the instructor when employing humor. Some can do it so naturally; for others, it is strained and a source of more tension in the classroom than comfort."

"Humor is a funny thing. It takes talent to be an effective comedian. I do try to leave my innate snideness out of the room."

essential ingredient:
"I would say humor is an essential, if sometimes small, part of effective reference and bibliographic instruction."

never offend or ridicule students:
"Since I often use humor in my everyday interpersonal relations, it naturally carries over into my reference of library instruction work. One has to be careful not to offend or be seen as ridiculing students, but I think humor can be used effectively in many library situations."

"I never direct humorous remarks at/about the student. Even what may seem to me to be a harmless remark might be taken seriously by the student, producing opposite to those that I hope for. This applies to international and American students."

great topic!
I did a paper on this for a grad course in motivation and learning. Then I made a presentation on the topic!

a shared experience:
"I believe that virtually any service-based interaction is enhanced by a sharing of smiles and/or humor. Shared humor creates a bond and the information transaction is then more likely to be a shared experience."

makes me comfortable:
"This was somewhat difficult to fill out; I have not given much thought to why, when, how and when I use humor in instruction or reference. I suspect much of it is for self-centered reasons, like I am uncomfortable, so I try and lighten my own situation by using humor."

humorous, sensitive colleagues:
"Fortunately, I work with a group of librarians who all employ humor and sensitivity in teaching and working with students."

we're real people:
"I have always had a gut feeling that humor in the library is very important, for both students and librarians. Instruction can be so dull for students; let them know that we're real people who have other interests than in the LC classification system!"

the delicate balance between patron and librarian:
"I'm a lot less likely to use humor at the Reference Desk, probably because it might upset the delicate balance between patron and librarian. In the classroom humor is invaluable and a very effective teaching tool."

NSO/1992

CONCLUSIONS

Seventy questionnaires were sent to a random selection of librarians in the State University of New York Librarians' Association Directory. There were forty-three respondents.

Reference and instruction librarians evidence a great deal of respect for the students with whom they work in classrooms and at the Reference Desk. They are respectful also of the possibilities and power of the use of appropriate humor; concomitantly, they express concern about the inappropriate use of humor. Desirous of being taken seriously, one respondent commented: "I am careful not to immediately resort to humor so as to not appear flippant or unconcerned. I try to convey at first that I take my responsibility as a librarian/teacher seriously, but I like to be approachable and fun-loving, too."

Approachability and making students feel welcome received high marks as reasons for being "of good humor." The recognition that libraries can be intimidating to many students leads librarians to employ humor to make people at ease. Several respondents indicated that they were grateful to work with colleagues who are sensitive and have "senses of humor," because this can smooth the way in difficult encounters.

A number of respondents indicated that humor is simply a part of their lives; it never occurred to them to work with library patrons without employing humor, when it fits the occasion. Others are more self-conscious, uncertain because of something they read or something they heard about the use of humor in classroom environments. A number of library instruction librarians create curriculum materials related to the subject being taught, which contain humor as a prime element.

Concern about the "delicate balance between patron and librarian" at the Reference Desk was expressed by one respondent. Probably it is this delicate

balance that we all need to have foremost in our minds as we decide how to put patrons at ease, so that we can make the best of our reference encounters.

This is a small study, one which may be used primarily as a springboard for dialogue between and among instruction and reference librarians. During times of fiscal belt-tightening, personnel cuts, responsibility expansion, and lack of personal control over some aspects of our work environment, librarians might well take Norman Cousins' suggestions that humor may lead to good health.